



**Ethical Dilemmas:  
Individual Human Rights versus Sustainable Development**

**Excellence, Migration and Equality Policy:  
Managing Unintended Consequences?**

***Thematic Paper***

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# Excellence, Migration and Equality Policy: Managing Unintended Consequences?

## Introduction: The ResIST Project

The findings reported in this paper derive from an FP6-funded Integrated Project concerned with inequalities in the field of science and technology. The project is known by the acronym 'ResIST' which stands for, 'Researching Inequality through Science and Technology'.<sup>1</sup> The broad objective of the ResIST programme can be summarised as follows:

*To analyse the ways in which regulatory regimes, policies and practices involving S&T contribute to the reproduction of social and economic and inequalities within and between European member states, and between the EU and candidate and developing countries (project proposal).*

In common with most EU-funded 'Integrated Projects', the research programme comprises a series of linked studies (otherwise known as Work Packages). The second of these (WP2) focuses specifically on human resource issues in science and technology and is entitled: 'Policy Tensions in Relation to the Pursuit of Equality: Promoting Scientific Mobility and Balanced Growth'.

The WP2 study was designed to address two dimensions of inequality. Firstly, the issue of individual equity and equality of opportunity in science careers and secondly, the impact that scientific career decision-making and mobility, in particular, has on regional inequality and balanced growth. It envisaged a number of policy 'tensions' from the outset. The first of these, stemming from our previous work on scientific mobility in the context of EU enlargement (Ackers and Gill, 2008) concerned the tension between individual equity (the right to freedom of movement) and regional equality (balanced growth and 'development'). At project design stage we were influenced by our own ongoing research, in the European context, and the literature on scientific 'brain drain' and its effects on 'sending' regions. At this stage the issue of individual equity we were concerned with was that of free movement or migration rights – the ability of an individual scientist to exercise mobility in order to access scientific positions abroad. At this point in time we were aware of increasing policy emphasis on encouraging highly skilled migration both *within* an enlarging European Union and from third countries into the EU.

The increasing emphasis on the development of the 'knowledge economy' focuses attention on the role of international mobility as the basis for the transfer of knowledge and scientific expertise. The development of the European Research Area (ERA) lies at the heart of the European Commission's strategy to achieve the Lisbon objectives and central to this is the commitment to increase both the volume and quality of researchers. With specific reference to the 'brain drain to the US', the Commission Communication, 'A Mobility Strategy for the European Research Area', refers to the need for 'more abundant' human resources and the objective of 'attracting and retaining high quality

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<sup>1</sup> FP6 Contract no. CIT5-CT-2006-029052.

research talent in Europe.’<sup>2</sup> A key policy driver at EU level lies in the commitment to a significant overall development in R&D capacity (3% GDP target) and the human capital implications of this. According to European Commission calculations, this target will necessitate an increase in capacity of 700,000 new researchers (in addition to those needed to respond to demographic concerns).<sup>3</sup>

The Lisbon objectives, however, also refer to the idea of ‘sustainable economic growth’. More recently, the European Charter for Researchers and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers<sup>4</sup> explicitly recognizes the potential tensions between unfettered mobility and sustainable development in the ‘sending’ countries:

*The development of a consistent career and **mobility policy** for researchers to and from the EU should be considered with regard to the situation in developing countries and regions within and outside Europe, so that building capacities within the EU does not occur at the expense of less developed countries or regions (para. 13).*

Following specific concerns around the impact of scientific mobility on capacity-building in developing countries, in 2005, the European Commission issued an ‘EU Strategy for Action on the Crisis in Human Resources for Health in Developing Countries.’<sup>5</sup> This document exposes more clearly the perceived ‘risks’ of highly skilled (e)migration:

*The long term manageability of international migration hinges on making the option to remain in one’s own country a viable one for all people. Sustainable economic growth and equity and development strategies consistent with this aim are a necessary means to that end (2005: 5).*

The objectives of Work Package 2 were framed in this emerging policy context and set out to examine the tensions that existed between the EU’s policy to further open up its scientific labour markets to third country nationals and the promotion of sustainable development. From the perspective of individual equity we had planned to focus our attention on individual rights primarily in terms of the free movement rights (and the non-discrimination embodied within these) in terms of accessing employment opportunities in the *receiving* countries (the UK and Germany). Our idea was to assess the concerns that Mouton et al refer to (citing President of the African Union, Alpha Oumar Konare) that ‘selective immigration policies’ are luring scientists away in a, ‘one-sided decision to loot African countries’ (2007: 36).

Our empirical work with South African scientists has exposed some rather different concerns about the relationship between equality and mobility which are not so much connected with individual mobility rights (as pull factors or magnets) as the individual

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<sup>2</sup> COM(2001) 331, June 2001, para. 1.

<sup>3</sup> Council Resolution on the Profession and the Career of Researchers within the European Research Area (ERA) 14636/03 Rech 194 Brussels, 12 November 2003. The Resolution acknowledges the Commission’s Communication ‘Researchers in the European Research Area: One Profession, Multiple Careers COM(2003) 436 of 18 July 2003.

<sup>4</sup> Commission of the European Communities 11.3.2005 C(2005) 576.

<sup>5</sup> Communication to the Council and the European Parliament ‘EU Strategy for Action on the Crisis in Human Resources for Health in Developing Countries’ (COM(2005) 642 final dated Brussels 12.12.2005)

employment rights of scientists in South Africa (and the role they play in encouraging exit and discouraging return). Although these policies are not explicitly designed to shape mobility they do so in practice – as an unintended consequence (externality effect). We are referring here to the post-apartheid employment context and the complex effects of ‘affirmative’ action measures.

Much of the research literature on highly skilled migration refers to the importance of national context to an understanding of migration decision-making (Ackers, 2005). Meyer’s work on scientific mobility emphasises the need to capture the ‘strong diversity of situations’ through more reliable assessment and monitoring of policy responses and a precise description of the situations of specific countries (2003: 3). King also stresses the value of country-specific and fully contextualised, comparative, approaches which ‘embed migration in its social context’ (2002: 90). This paper focuses on one dimension of the study – namely the movement of researchers between South Africa and the UK and the impact that *employment policies in South Africa* have on scientific mobility. The study was not designed to focus specifically on employment policy in South Africa and neither intends to present a comprehensive overview of South African employment policy or to critique that policy as such. Rather it draws on the narratives of our respondents (and mainly those interviewed in the UK) to explore the relationship between South African employment policy and scientific mobility.

Kahn et al.’s study on South African ‘brain drain’ (entitled ‘Flight of the Flamingos’) explains the rationale for using in-depth life history interviews in this kind of research arguing that, ‘A drawback of relying on a systems approach is that it does not access the human and social dimensions involved in understanding issues of mobility’ (2004: 85). He is also wary of the potential limitations of qualitative approaches and the ability to generalise from individual accounts and cautions that:

*One of the concerns of life history work is whether the stories are individual, solipsistic and idiosyncratic or whether they are connected to larger socio-historical events* (2004: 25).

However, citing Keegan (1988:131) he suggests that,

*When individual stories are set against a larger historical context, the ‘reminiscences of obscure individuals begin to re-shape our understanding of major forces of social change’* (cited in Kahn et al. 2004: 26).

The South African/UK study is interesting from this point of view. Of particular interest is the fact that the interviews conducted in South Africa by the South African partners precipitated quite different responses, on this issue, to those conducted in the UK by the UK partners.

### **‘Race’ – ‘Conspicuous by its Absence’: The Narratives of South African Returners**

The project design included 23 interviews in the UK, undertaken by the UK team, with scientists who had previously lived and worked in science research in South Africa and were, at the time of interview, working in science research in the UK. The South African

partners were then tasked to conduct 23 interviews with scientists in South Africa who had spent at least a year working in science research in the UK and had returned to work in science in South Africa.<sup>6</sup> Just as contextualisation by country is important so, too, is contextualisation by discipline. Previous studies have found that mobility behaviour varies significantly depending on discipline and field (Mahroum, 2001; Ackers, 2005).<sup>7</sup> For this reason we endeavoured to focus our sampling as much as possible on scientists working in the bio-medical field.

The interview schedule was broadly similar for both countries although the South African schedule included additional questions on the return move. Building on our previous experience of qualitative interviewing, it was also designed to take the form of a ‘guided conversation’ providing as much opportunity as possible for respondents to shape the discussion and express their own views and concerns. In the course of the interviews respondents were encouraged to talk generally about the factors shaping their own migration decisions.

It was very rare indeed for the researchers interviewed in South Africa to explicitly identify issues around race or South African employment equity policy as factors shaping their own mobility (including outward moves and returns). Where respondents did raise issues around race there was a marked tendency to talk in rather oblique ways and not to develop arguments. Unusually, one respondent (who referred to himself as ‘someone from an ethnic minority’) described South Africa as the ‘pinnacle of discrimination’ and suggested that the UK, in contrast, was a ‘really open and non-discriminatory system’. However, the discussion did not move on from this to discuss his own experiences of the South African system on return. Several respondents referred to the situation of ‘white males’ but it seems that the term ‘white male’ had a meaning that was understood on an implicit level (in South Africa at least) without need for further explanation. In one case, the respondent explains his reasons for leaving South Africa as follows: *‘I started to look around and there just wasn’t anything available for a white male’* – however the meaning and implications of this in terms of his own mobility were not expanded upon.

In a number of other cases respondents used somewhat veiled language. Asked to compare working ‘cultures’ in the UK and South Africa one respondent comments: *‘There’s less division – here I tend to find people to be very clannish... people are stuck in their own mentality of the old South Africa.’*

In another example the respondent makes a similarly ‘cryptic’ comment:

*I found it very difficult to integrate in the workplace [in South Africa] because I felt that particular sectors of the population would stick together... we’re not fully integrated in terms of a lot of things that are hidden away from you because you don’t belong to a particular group.*

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<sup>6</sup> It is important to note that the sampling strategy did not include ‘quotas’ according to race although the research partners endeavoured to identify a diverse sample. In South Africa the majority of respondents were white. The sample of 23 included 1 black, 1 coloured and 4 Indian researchers. In the UK the sample of 23 included 16 white, 4 black, 2 South Asian and 1 East Asian researcher

<sup>7</sup> The importance of field to scientific mobility is discussed in more detail in one of our other papers (Deliverable #10 by Esau and de Waal).

The only explicit reference to race in the interviews conducted in South Africa arose in an interview with a more established researcher who visited the US during what he described as the ‘heyday of Apartheid’ – and here the respondent comments that he experienced no real antipathy or restrictions as ‘*American Southern States had just come out of their sort of quasi-apartheid*’.

## **The Interviews with South African Scientists in the UK**

*In South Africa, you know, everything that you do in South Africa, everything, you know, there is some colour in between.*

The experience of interviewing South African scientists in the UK was entirely different. In almost every case respondents identified the issue of race/colour, often without any prompting, and many talked at length about the relationship between apartheid and post-apartheid employment equity policy in South Africa and their own migration decision-making. The statement above, by one of our respondents, indicates the different approach to the ‘race’ issue and the profound sense conveyed in many interviews, that understanding migration decisions demands attention to race. Perhaps this situation is so common-sense in South Africa that it didn’t need stating whereas respondents in the UK felt they had to explain the South African political context to enable us to understand their responses. Or, perhaps South Africans find the topics too sensitive to discuss openly in their own country and with their peers.<sup>8</sup>

Our interpretation of the UK-based interviews conveys an image of South African scientific employment as both remarkably complex and in the midst of transition. The age of respondents, their ethnicity (race) and the time of migration all play an important role in shaping responses. Analysis of the findings indicates three broad dimensions of employment policy that have an important impact on migration behaviour:

1. The Long Term Effects of Apartheid
2. Employers’ Resistance to Policy Change
3. Researchers’ Perceptions & Responses to Employment Equity Policies.

These concerns impact on migration behaviour shaping who leaves, who stays and who returns with important implications in terms of sustainable capacity-building. The following section discusses these issues in further detail and illustrates them by reference to the interview findings.

## **The Long Term Effects of Apartheid**

Kahn et al.’s study makes reference to ‘organisational culture’ as a potential barrier to social change in South Africa:

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<sup>8</sup> The research has raised some very important issues around the interviewer effect and the extent to which selection of methods and approach shaped responses. These issues will be developed in a future paper.

*'There is still concern about the shortage of African men and women (especially black) R&D workers... this is a reason for concern, and we need to probe whether the reason for the inequitable ideographic distribution lies in a lack of supply or in the culture of organisations' (2004: 90).*

*Furthermore, 'Organisational culture is an important driver of outward mobility, especially for young black researchers... in some organisations there appears to be a problem of 'fit' between young black researchers and older academic staff' (p. 97).*

It will come as no surprise that Apartheid policies continue to have an effect on academic labour markets and migration behaviour. Although formal laws and policy have changed Apartheid has clearly had a corrosive effect on collective memory and trust. One respondent described the problems he had faced trying to secure a position in an Afrikaans university and attributes this to the persistence of racial stereotypes, which in the case of scientific employment, are more rarely challenged by the active presence of black employees:

*Because of the history of South Africa, having a black person in science whatever that's another question ... He [the employer] has been brought up in such a manner, he knows that a black person can't make it in science or whatever ... they've got an acquired hatred for blacks.*

In addition to the persistence of entrenched attitudes it was clear that socio-economic inequalities continue to have a marked indirect impact on migration. The intersection of race with class and financial status influences residential location which in turn determines access to education and exposure to crime. Kahn's report echoes one of the primary policy concerns at the present time:

*The stark imbalances in gender and racial representativeness in the science and technology system, and in research in particular, require urgent attention. Unfortunately the inflows from the higher education system, which in turn are dependent on the feed-through from the schooling system, will take considerable time to change (Kahn et al, 2004 xiii).*

Affordability of housing and access to the more prestigious and resource-rich institutions is a particular challenge for many young black South Africans restricting the feeder routes into science. On the other hand, scientific careers may seem less attractive to those sections of the community facing economic hardship. Science research is rarely associated with attractive remuneration packages and pay differentials need to be analysed in the context of relative living costs. This has implications in two respects. Firstly, young black South Africans are generally unlikely to see science careers as an attractive career option in the first place. The extended pre-qualification period and costs of studying to that level will be prohibitive in many cases. The following respondent tells of the difficulties he faced in negotiating his move to the UK given his family responsibilities:

*I thought I wasn't gonna come over here at all, reasons were my parents were not very happy about me coming over here, I've got four sisters and my father doesn't work, he is a farmer and farming wasn't going very well and he was hoping I'd*

*find a job and help my sisters with their education. They were not very happy because they thought I was studying for ever and they were like ... when [will you be] starting your own life and I was getting old as well, I mean I still live in the same house with my parents.*

He goes on to explain how he lived frugally in his first year in the UK effectively saving as much as he could of his scholarship to send home and support his sisters:

*I saved up and my sister was at the high school at that time and ... I was able to save and get the ticket home and give my sister some money – enough to take care for the first semester.*

The issue of relative remuneration and living costs also arose in the context of return decision-making. Some of the respondents interviewed in the UK referred to the high cost of living in the UK and the need to balance income with costs arguing that financial imperatives could not be taken in isolation from the costs and quality of life factors. One Afrikaans woman felt that she could ‘probably live much better in South Africa. Because houses are, y’know, much cheaper... the... cost of living is much cheaper.’ In a later interview, when we put this scenario to a black African respondent, he commented:

*In South Africa the cost of living has gone much lower really, yeah, but still, I can say that, she (the other respondent) is more likely to be a white person... If it was a black person then that gives a different story because of our different backgrounds [referring to the significant debt and financial hardship] because in South Africa, you know, everything that you do in South Africa, everything, there is some colour in between.*

The respondents went on to talk about the issue of debt that faced many black scientists often as a result of their own education or underwriting the costs of their siblings’ education. Perhaps one of the most common issues discouraging return moves concerned the issue of violent crime in South Africa. Residential location is a significant factor here. Poorer neighbourhoods close to urban areas typically experience more serious crime rates. Many universities are located in such urban areas. Where people can afford to locate themselves away from these areas concerns about crime are likely to be mitigated. Living and working in a town such as Stellenbosch, for example, is likely to raise far fewer concerns around crime and the risk of bringing up children in the South African context.

This first group of issues is not so much about employment policy as the long term and continued impact of Apartheid on employment and migration decision-making. It is important to be reminded of this situation and the persistence, particularly of socio-economic inequalities, in order to understand the continued under-representation of black people in the scientific sector and the extent to which responses to migration stimuli continue to be shaped by race and ethnicity.

Many interviewees also identified concerns about the specific consequences of post-Apartheid employment policy on migration behaviour. Some respondents talked about the tactics that employers used to ‘avoid’ or circumvent post-Apartheid employment quality policies. One respondent, a white woman, spoke of the resistance she had witnessed, particularly in Afrikaans universities to policy change. On the one hand she



felt that the decision to continue to deliver university courses in Afrikaans could be seen as a form of indirect discrimination designed to restrict the number of black students. In addition to this she spoke of the ability of resource-rich Afrikaans institutions to avoid some of the impacts of reform by increasing their reliance upon external sources of funding:

*the university has excellent industrial funding but it's positioned itself very strongly as being the premier of Afrikaans language speaking institute. It has been resistant to change in that respect so all undergraduate teaching is offered in Afrikaans and most of the research is conducted and presented in Afrikaans which limits international interaction...*

In a small number of cases respondents referred to more direct forms of pressure designed to restrict the implementation of new employment policies. The following respondent, 'Peter' detailed an extensive catalogue of experiences of trying to work in science in Afrikaans institutions which eventually lead to his migration:

### **Case Study – 'Peter' (Black African Male)**

Peter had experienced very serious problems prior to leaving which made employers very cautious and defensive about applying black people. These included forms of bullying or harassment designed to restrict the participation of black people in formal applications processes. Peter described the early 1990s as a period of 'pre-emptive defensive practice' during which time both public and private institutions were concerned about the impact of new employment policies:

*In South Africa things had to change to include things like affirmative action but they were still busy with the laws and so on and so industry were quite resistant to change...*

He goes on to describe how this 'resistance' to change had impacted on his own employment opportunity:

*One of the guys I spoke to in this company told me that now, in terms of the new labour laws, if you sent in an application then they won't acknowledge that they've received your application 'cause they said now if they acknowledge then by law they're compelled to interview you so ... they are quite clever in doing things and so, because they were not sure as to where things were going and so the new labour laws 'cause they say that now they favour the applicant and so on and they're not happy with that, it gives applicant rights.*

After his degree Peter did some casual (non-scientific) work for 6 months and then started working as a research assistant in an Afrikaans University and subsequently decided to apply for an honours degree there. However:

*'things didn't work out because the ... Afrikaans University, they're quite conservative, the treatment that I got there was really quite shameful. I didn't even start an honours degree because the head of department, he just decided that he didn't like me at all. I've never done anything wrong to ... he just said no, he's not going to accept me, he didn't even allow me to put in a formal application.*

*Q: Do you think that was a personal thing or was it because it was an Afrikaans university?*

*The lady who was trying to recruit me said, 'no, you stand there [you're] in a good position to apply' but then I said no even if we push the matter and I'm admitted the problem is I'm still going to be faced with him on a daily basis . . .*

*Even now my attitude to Afrikaans Universities ... Stellenbosch ... the University of Pretoria. It's still there, I don't want anything to do with Afrikaans Universities any more since that. Even now if I have to go to South Africa you won't see me in those universities. There's still quite a lot of resistance [to recruiting black people] If they recruit you, even in the so-called English-speaking universities in South Africa, black academics are not one thing that I see. They only stay there for a year, their maximum, then they are gone. [They are] not comfortable.*

Peter then went to the University of Cape Town to do his honours and masters degree and secured a research position in another Afrikaans research institute on a project funded by a South African pharmaceutical company: *'I was the only black person with a masters degree there. The treatment that I got there wasn't good either – when I left I took the company to lawyers.* Peter goes on to describe a catalogue of discriminatory treatment including receiving markedly lower pay than his peers and forms of surveillance:

*The second thing was in terms of racial discrimination – I caught them red-handed putting a spy camera in my office.*

*Q: Why did they do that?*

*I really just don't know. That was just the beginning, this even got worse because even the telephone, I wouldn't use a telephone, I'd go and use a pay-phone outside.*

*Q: Was it just you that was experiencing this then?*

*Yeah, they had some other blacks, there were two research assistants but they left, you know, I stayed a bit longer and then I was the main target.*

*It's not an issue that they didn't trust in my abilities. It's an issue that they felt insecure like oh, we've got that black person coming here and the company's changing policies to include affirmative action and whatever so it was a threat to them. They felt threatened, 'cause, I remember one day I went to work dressed semi-formal then these guys they became stressed, one of them came to ask me, 'Are you going for an interview'. I said no, why do you ask? 'It's because we've been invited for interview since we thought that, if you're going for interview, we might as well not pitch because then the job, they are going to give it to you'.*

He then goes on to describe a further escalation of affairs. According to the respondent whilst he was on leave the people at work deliberately 'messed up' the samples he was responsible for in order to jeopardize his experiments. He finally resigned concerned that a further escalation could put him personally at risk:

*Things were getting worse that I was afraid because I work with viruses, they can infect me with a virus or whatever, because things were just really, really quite bad.*

Asked whether the development of affirmative action had played a role in his situation he replied:

*Yeah, I mean they made life more difficult because in the history of the institution they were only employing blacks to be cleaners or to look after the animals so it was maybe a culture shock but all of a sudden you've got a black person. So now in South Africa they know that they're always superior and a black person's inferior and so now in terms of relating to me, they cannot relate to me in that manner – to look at me as inferior because I have the same provisional conditions like them.*

Peter then moved to the UK to take up a doctoral scholarship at a highly prestigious institution.

Interestingly, a white respondent tells a similar story – albeit less shocking – of a colleague of hers who applied for and secured a research position in Germany. She goes on to describe the fact that one of her female colleagues had also applied but wasn't short-listed. Apparently, when she enquired about this situation 'informally', she was told that,

*'In Germany, because they want to encourage women into science, they have this policy that if any of the first 10 selected are a woman, she has to get the job, so they tend not to shortlist women, because that would limit them and so, actually, it's something of a good intention is working against people'.*

Peter is careful to locate his own experience within a specific time frame – the 1990's – and a period of marked policy shift which inevitably gives rise to pre-emptive forms of policy resistance. Many more of our respondents referred to the impact that the new policy environment had had on their employment opportunities in South Africa and, the influence this then had on their migration decision-making and, more specifically, attitudes to return moves.

### **Researchers' Perceptions & Responses to Employment Equity Policies (Affirmative Action)**

It is important to point out before identifying some of the serious concerns our respondents had about employment equity policies in South Africa, that the overwhelming majority of both black and white respondents expressed strong support for the need for policy exchange and sympathy for policy intervention to counter the effects of Apartheid and support more meritocratic and fair recruitment. However, the empirical work raised a number of key concerns around the 'externalities' connected with the new policy environment (and the introduction of affirmative action through the Employment Equity Act and the Black Economic Empowerment Act). Although the issues raised were often quite complex and difficult to discuss in an interview situation, two broad groups of issues emerged. The first concerned the effects of affirmative action on the mobility of the people it was designed to promote – namely black and coloured men and women (irrespective of colour) and the second, its effects on the mobility of the previously advantaged group (white men).

## Policy Backlash? Tokenism and Stereotyping

One element of policy backlash or ‘collateral damage’ associated with affirmative action schemes concerned the effects that tokenistic appointments had on the perceived quality of ‘previously disadvantaged’ groups. The problems of tokenism have been associated with positive action and positive discrimination in a European context for many years. A study of the representation of women in the European Commission’s flag ship Marie Curie scheme raised serious objections, mainly from the target population (in this case female scientists) concerned about the effects it had on perceptions of excellence and merit (Ackers, 2000: 2003).

The perspective that the selection of a candidate for a position may be influenced by factors other than excellence (and in this case, colour) is problematic in itself. The particular situation in South Africa precipitates a more complex and pressing dynamic. The profound effects of Apartheid on the ‘gap’ between educational opportunity of black and white people in the scientific recruitment pool and the dramatic shift in policy post-Apartheid has increased the potential for appointments to be influenced by colour. In practice this inevitably implies that, in some situations, black or coloured people will be offered positions at a much earlier stage in their career trajectory. In other words, they may well be relatively less experienced (although this is not in itself connected to innate ability of course).

The employment of less experienced people in senior and often management positions is likely to cause problems in terms of immediate performance. This situation, in itself, can compound the view (which according to respondents was quite prevalent during the Apartheid times) that black people are somehow less competent. Certainly this is how some of our respondents described the situation.

In the first example the respondent, a white woman, talks of how her colleague, a black woman, was disappointed to be awarded an equity scholarship rather than the ‘prestige’ award:

*I had a friend that’s black and when we were applying for our PhDs they were two types of bursary so there were equity bursaries where the actual academic qualifications were much lower to try and compensate for people that had very poor education and then there were prestige awards that were really for only top performers and when she applied she was first in her class, she got a equity award an’ she was so angry ‘cause she said she wanted a prestige award. She didn’t want something as a hand me down, she wanted a prestige award an’ I think there’s a lot of women in South Africa that want to be employed because they’re the best not because they’re women an’ then of course you’ve got this double-whammy of men then going oh, why’s she got the job – oh it’s gender and equity, it’s a very difficult thing to address.*

Mari (a white Afrikaans respondent) makes a similar observation:

*[Affirmative Action] is certainly a very big problem. You absolutely have to understand the reason behind it. The reason behind it is so good because it is just not fair that they're, most of them in managerial or higher up jobs in academia are all white people, while most of the citizens of the country are black and that goes for everywhere but then in certain places where affirmative action has just been too vigorously employed we have problems ... they simply do not have the managers or the engineers or the people with the know-how because they laid off white people with years of experience in preference for black people without experience who might be very competent but simply don't have the experience. I think in the end it's detrimental to the country and that's a pity.*

Some of our respondents were black Africans from other countries who had worked or trained in South Africa prior to moving to the UK. Employment equity policies and the 'quotas' associated with them promote the employment of these black Africans irrespective of their nationality. This group of respondents tended to have a more positive perspective on the opportunities generated as a result of these policies. The following respondent (Frank) talks of both the opportunities that exist and the persistence of inequality:

*There are immense opportunities for Africans, coloureds in South Africa – such that would probably not encourage them to migrate to the Europe. I mean you can finish your honours and get the job of a director!*

*The science faculty in South Africa is still dominated by white people. So the white, even in the black universities you still have predominantly white people there and where you see a few black faces you know they are foreigners. At that top level if you see a black face in South Africa, in the faculty of science, it's probably coming from another country. Otherwise, you know they are mostly Indians and whites.*

*It's a very slow process – take my department in [South Africa]. At the time I was the only black person there, the other four people were white South Africans right, but the moment one resigns or retires I'd make sure I'd bring another Indian or a black and so at the moment we have only one white person in the department [laughs]. So we've transformed that image of white domination in my department.*

*And quite a number of predominantly, historically, white universities, they are also struggling to do that. And that's why at the moment, you finish your PhD, at one of these universities and you are black everybody wants you.*

Frank's comments illustrate the state of flux and transition at the present time. On the one hand he feels that the employment equity policies have generated significant opportunities for career entry and advancement of South African black and coloured researchers – even if they have fewer qualifications. On the other, he suggests that few South African black people have in reality penetrated the system (although coloured people have). This view concurs with the findings of Kahn's study:

*Those who had international reputation during the apartheid era continue to have a comparative advantage in terms of skills and expertise now (2004: 87).*

Where black people are in evidence, Frank indicates that most of these come from outside of the country. In a final example illustrating the complexity and potential risks associated with affirmative action, the following respondent suggests that employment equity policies will reduce competitiveness, motivation and quality:

*The trouble is if you do re-dress it simply by a sort of your reactive mode you end up seriously compromising the standards of the universities and that has happened.*

### **Are Young White Men Paying the Price? The Individual Impact and its Effects on Research Capacity**

Kahn et al.'s work on human resources in South African R&D concludes that, notwithstanding the effects of employment equity, 'the research fraternity is largely white and over 55 years old' (2005: 92). South Africa shares a problem identified in the new EU member states of a 'devastating generation gap' (Ackers and Gill, 2008).

We have referred above to the fact that it was very rare for respondents in the South African sample to refer to issues of race or affirmative action. However, on several occasions veiled reference was made to the plight of the, 'white male.' The interviews with white South African scientists in the UK were much more explicit about this issue and many respondents identified it as a key factor shaping their initial outward move and their propensity to return.

It is important, at the outset, to emphasise the fact that nearly all of our respondents (irrespective of race) in the UK expressed a very strong commitment to the need for policy change to rectify the damage caused by Apartheid. The following views were typical:

*They're trying to overcome 60, 70 years of Apartheid and it's only been 15 since Apartheid was abolished. [However] in trying to eliminate one kind of discrimination they kinda have to introduce another kind of discrimination [Black male].*

*It's not that I disagree with that policy but it doesn't enable me to fulfil my goals in terms of career progression [White male].*

Mari is a white Afrikaans woman who came over to the UK to do her PhD and is now on her second post-doc. She is keen to return to South Africa but feels that her opportunities may be restricted for two reasons. Firstly, because she has changed field (and her new field is less developed in South Africa). Secondly, she feels that employment equity policies will make it hard for her to secure a position even as a woman: Mari, in common with most respondents starts by emphasising the necessity of policy reform:

*You have to address understandably the problem that most people [in universities] are white and y'know, it's not reflecting the composition of the country.*

She then goes on to suggest that the current policy climate would make it hard for her, personally, to secure a position:

*There are posts advertised which they even have to state it's 'affirmative action' and I know of friends back in South Africa who are really struggling to get jobs who are my age and still doing one post-doc after another and not [securing positions] . In my university I had a person who did his honours maybe a year after me, was a very competent black man and I mean he's now in a very high position in a research institution just because they're so rare, black people, because science is not the most attractive...*

Mari understands the need for policy to rectify the inequalities associated with Apartheid but she is also clear that the current policy climate is not conducive to effective return and professional re-integration. More worrying, she is also concerned that the policies are having a damaging effect on the country as a whole through its effects on capacity.

This is Mari's perception of the situation. Other female interviewees had a rather different perception that the current policy climate would actively favour their return, as women (and members of a 'previously disadvantaged group') but would penalise their white male partners (see below).

Marc recounts his own experience as a white male trying to secure a scientific position in South Africa. He starts by suggesting that his status, as a white male, influenced the type of research he was able to do:

*The first project I was interested in was on xxxx but as political as things are in South Africa I was asked not to pursue it. The co-supervisor didn't want me to do the project. I don't want to speculate on the reasons but it was hinted that I was a white male and the person would have preferred a person from, as they like to call I, 'previously disadvantaged' community to take on the project. Then there was another project on [a quite different topic] which I did.*

Marc goes on to describe the kind of 'massaging' of employment policy (in this case the use of internal appointment procedures) as a strategy to 'achieve targets' which necessarily limits the opportunities for 'outsiders' and, in so doing, the openness and transparency of appointments:

*There was a position available and again through some kind of loop hole they couldn't find a reason, it's like they say we have to go through this whole routine of advertising internally first, because I'm a student looking to come in I was always external. So they had to advertise internally but they couldn't not give it to the one girl that applied, they couldn't find a good enough reason, so they had to give it to her.*

*Then my supervisor for my masters project said she's got a little project she needs to have finished, so she'll contract me out. I did that for a couple of months while I was applying for other jobs. I think I applied for seven in an eight month period. I don't want to sound like I was discriminated against but I was definitely discriminated against, you know it's a fact of life, South Africa has a very complicated history. In the movies, they say they have a token black person, I was the token white male at the interview. I knew that my grades were better than them but they would get the position. Also because the government had introduced affirmative action – it's now called business employment equity. So they try to*

*encourage companies to have certain ratios of white males, white females, Asian males, Asian females, black males, black females, favouring previously disadvantaged communities, which is great but at the same time it's creating different dynamics.*

In another case, the respondent feels that his opportunities are narrowly restricted in South Africa because he is white. Rather than suggesting that black people are less adequate or capable he indicates that the long term effects of the policy may be to reduce motivation and competitiveness:

*You can be the absolute perfect fit for the job, you can have all the awards and all the best grades in the world but sometimes they specifically state this is an employment equity job and it doesn't matter if you can jump through hoops or if you can become invisible – there's no way that you'll get the job if you are not black. So that's pretty bad.*

*Most of the people who have fled are white people because black people have got the opportunities and there are quite a lot of them that are really excellent that can fill that gap but I think there might also be a culture of... erm..., they are now so used to receiving that now they don't really have to put in the same kind of efforts, I've seen a lot of that, I don't know what the impact of that will be.*

It is not uncommon for migrants who wish to return to consider moving into self-employment in order to avoid some of the problems of labour market closure in the public sector. This situation was certainly evident in our work with Bulgarian and Polish scientists in a previous study which found that many returnees were blocked from positions by recruitment systems based on networks and nepotism (Ackers and Gill, 2008). An earlier study on gender and migration also identified high levels of self-employment amongst migrant women in the European Union particularly amongst those women facing problems with the mutual recognition of qualifications or in attempting to achieve a work-life balance in a migration context (Ackers, 1998). Interestingly, the following respondent suggested that self-employment was perhaps the only route to return for a white, male, scientist:

*If you want to make a success of your professional life in South Africa as a white person, you really need to be doing a job where you are self employed – because that means that you're not reliant on trying to compete against a population group that's based simply on skin colour which is extremely difficult to do.*

### **Policy Tensions: Gender, Race and Dual Career Issues**

South African Employment Equity policy extends affirmative action to both black and coloured men and women and women as a group (irrespective of colour). Recent research suggests that the main beneficiaries of these policies have been white women (get reference off Heidi). Employment policy, in common with migration policy, tends to assume that people are individuals. In practice, both career and migration decision takes place in a relational context with individual responses framed by considerations about partners and children amongst other things (Ackers and Stalford, 2004; Ackers and Stalford, 2008). Previous research has highlighted the prevalence of dual science couples



with the majority of partnered female scientists having partners who are also scientists (Ackers, 2003; 2007). It is difficult to assess in a sample of this size what the prevalence of dual science couples is. However, the UK sample identified 3 clear cases in which both partners were actively engaged in science research. In two cases the woman was a white South African and in the third, a South African Indian. Whilst all the partners were white, only one was South African, another was French and the third, Scottish.

The interviews with these women raised a number of important issues in terms of the effect of employment equity on mobility. In the first instance there was a strong view that their own employment opportunity as women were enhanced by employment equity policies and their opportunities for return and professional reintegration were relatively high (especially if they were not white). On the other hand, the fact that they had partners who were white and male was a clear concern to them and tipped the balance in favour of developing their careers outside of South Africa.

In the first example the South African Indian woman explains how her relationship with a Scottish white partner would prevent her return:

*I really want to go back, but at the same time I met somebody – he's now my husband –, and affirmative action in South Africa – the thing is I'm not against it because academia is dominated by white men, period –, so you have to address that, but the reality is that my husband is just never going to find a job in academia at this time and space so I can go back easily and find a professorship now, he will never find employment, not permanent employment.*

In the next case, the woman expresses a keen interest in returning to South Africa to contribute to the science and the economy. She feels that her own chances of being recruited are limited and those of her partner, 'slim':

*Contributing to South Africa is something that I want to be able to do but ... because of the kind of workforce policies, because of my ethnic demographic, it would be very difficult to do. Working there right now in terms of actually getting a job in the first place and career progression.*

*Q: And how about your partner (French scientist) has he been over?*

*Would he ever consider going to live there, have you sort of had any thoughts about...?*

*He loves the idea but his chances of getting a job as a white guy in a South African university ...I would rate his chances as slim.*

## **The Situation of Chinese South Africans**

In a final 'twist' one of our interviewees in the UK was of South African Chinese descent (in fact his family were from Taiwan originally). His story and his own position, as a 'second class white' illustrates the complexity, arbitrariness and insult of the colour-coding adopted under the Apartheid system. In so doing, however, it also evidences the effects of replacing that with a system which is still fundamentally based on skin colour:

*Equal work opportunity wise I think [affirmative action] is relatively unfair to people of my skin colour, the Chinese/oriental ethnicity in the previous apartheid regime we were considered white, well a 'second class' white at that time. We were too dark at that time to the white government and now we are too pale to the black government. They say unless we naturalised before 1994 then we can be considered as the 'previously disadvantaged population'. If we naturalised after 94, like my case, then we are considered as a white nowadays. So in a workplace I would be compromised by affirmative action. Although I never had a doubt about my skills and expertise and I would still be demand in the country.*

During the time of our empirical work in the UK Chinese South Africans were taking action in the Courts to ensure that local Chinese people fell within the definition of 'black' under the Employment Equity and Broad-based Black Economic Empowerment Act. South African Chinese had been expressly excluded from empowerment schemes on the grounds that they were 'maybe not as discriminated against as coloured's or blacks' (reported in the Mail and Guardian online, October 15<sup>th</sup> 2008)

## **Conclusions**

As Kahn et al assert, it is always difficult to come to generalizations on the basis of a small sample size. Nevertheless these interviews, and the views expressed in them, have marked symbolic importance and raise serious challenges to the principles and objectives underpinning the very notion of affirmative action. Affirmative action policies in South Africa have added further complexity to an already perverse and highly distorted employment context. These processes, in turn, impact on migration behaviour shaping who leaves, who stays and who returns. To the extent that migration into and out of South Africa is motivated by racial considerations, this distorts any linear relationship between excellence (merit) and mobility.

Kahn et al. refer to these concerns around employment equity in his report identifying, '*a concern about the equity and development agenda in relation to R&D workers in South Africa. There is a tension between the agenda of excellence and that of equity... these issues have not been resolved*' (2004: 89). The research in the RESIST project unfortunately lends support to this assertion.

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